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ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS GWEN

by

Jean-François Laguionie

English translation by Fred Cassidy

Winter 1975…

For months now, I am turning around in circles. The house is almost finished, half-way down the small valley that leads to the river. The cliffs of "La Vis" trace the crestline above. The chestnut trees and ferns are in full color…

We left Paris three years before, with two young children in tow, trading in our city life for a house needing renovation. Toting an old Éclair 35mm camera with its Malta cross, which I have hooked on the wall, while the floors were still made of dirt.

In the village, without any pretention, we have a bad reputation. People saw us passing by with massive amounts of paper and a mysterious machine. When you come from the city, you are automatically looked upon with suspicion. What's more, we had declared ourselves illustrators. A rumor circulates, which we discover one day: counterfeit money!... Fifty years before, counterfeiters had set up shop in the adjoining valley. No more counterfeiters!... So we prepare a small party. I hang the old camera on the wall, I turn on the lights, we prepare the wine and the charcuterie... I can still see the nine inhabitants of the village walking down the small path together, entering the only room in our building that had been renovated and painted black... they are witnesses to my process, the twelve

shots that I take in the light, shots of a puppet cut out of paper… resulting in one second of film. "And you will make a twenty-minute film? My lord! You really are patient, aren't you?..." They only partly believe us, but who cares, it is our work to complete. Suddenly, we are adopted!...

1979… Already four years have passed. Time flies when you alternate challenging tasks (renovating the house, consolidating the little walls, planting a vegetable garden). I store all the elements of my recent short films in an organized manner. "Rowing Across the Atlantic" is finished since last year and I don't have the means to accompany it to the festivals. I felt rather alone in that film, especially towards the end as they say, in this eternity of images that need to be animated. Kali, with whom I made my last two films does not want to "row" with me this time around. She is dedicated to her own painting. Who can blame her, she creates marvelous works. The children live in total freedom. I write a little bit… It's not enough…

What else to do than rummage through the drawers? Sketches, little ideas… "Rowing Across the Atlantic", at 21 minutes in length is too long for festivals and too short to distribute in cinemas… And lately, in my stories, my characters need time… So then what? A feature film?...

As I am writing these lines, I realize that I am adopting the tone of a navigator. I have just concluded a voyage and an even bigger dream... With a new ship.

One day, Bernard and Nicole knock at the door, holding their bicycles. They have us believe that they have bike-ridden all the way from Annecy. In reality, their car is parked in the village... Bernard Palacios and Nicole Dufour have each made their own short films. They too want a change of scenery. This country is appealing to them. There are steep hills, but coming from Annecy, this is nothing new.

The idea of making a film with them excites me. I admire their painting skills, the scenery backgrounds in their films. I could let them steer the ship for the illustrations so that I can dedicate myself to directing… But what story should we tell?... I had written the screenplay for "Rowing

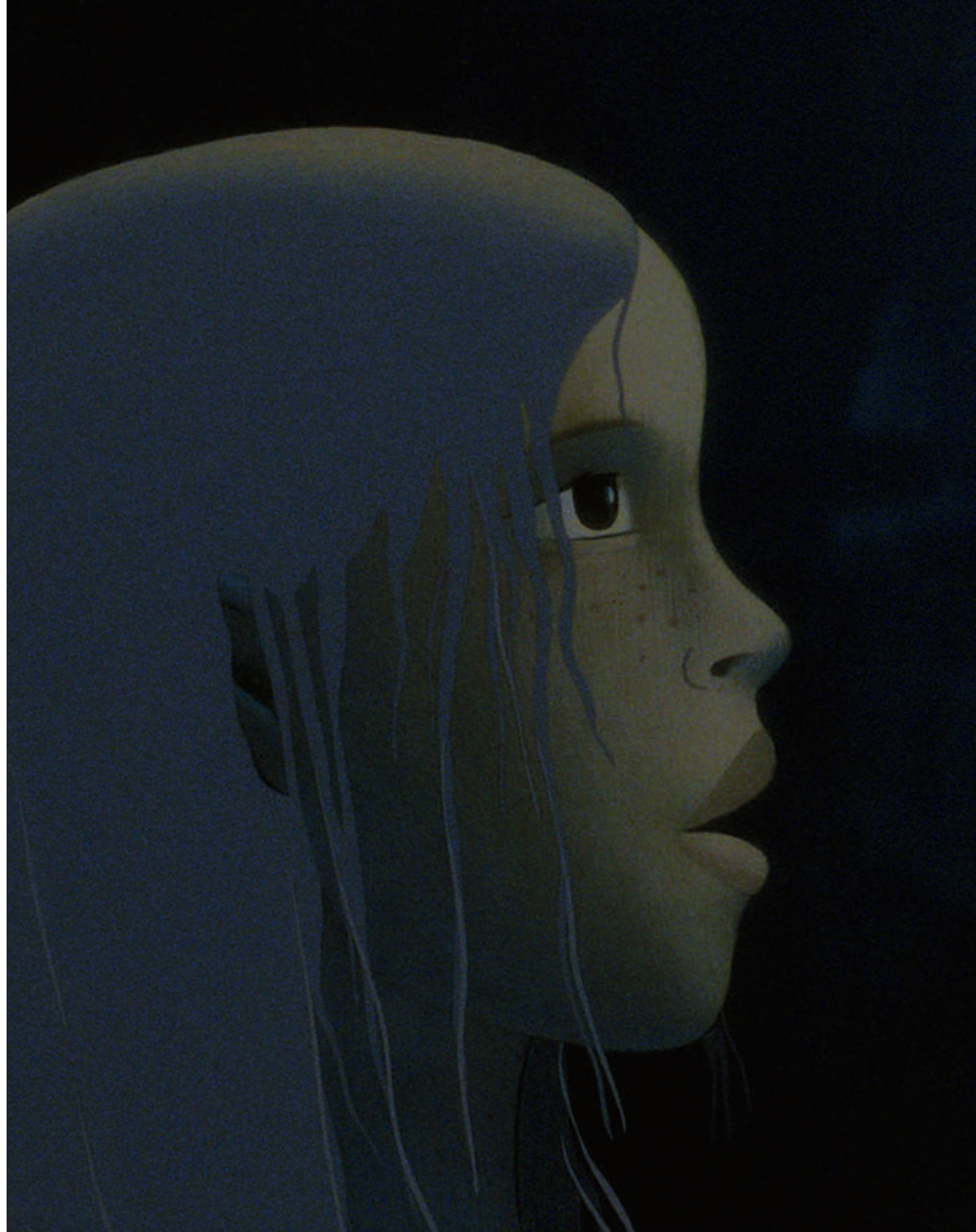
Across the Atlantic" with Jean-Paul Gaspari, a young writer from Sète. So we begin to work on a first draft of "The Desert of Ideas"… Two characters travel through a sand desert riddled with abandoned objects, televisions as big as mountains, suitcases used as homes... But who is leaving these objects here? Giants? If so, where did they go? And why are they abandoning them here?... It might be a good subject matter for an eco-political film, no doubt. I don't feel up to it. We have, Kali and I, a political culture that is closed to nil. 1968 isn't far away but our escape isn't radical in any way. A peaceful rejection of our consumer society. Our life is more beautiful like this, that's all… Of this story, only a few pages remain, one or two gouache renderings…

The idea percolates…

For Jean-Paul and me, popular feature-length animation does not have the highest reputation. It suffers from two myths: that it should be geared towards children, like the Disney productions… and that it should merely be entertainment. As dyed-in-the-wool cinephiles, it makes us a bit furious. When does maturity arrive? For me, as for my own references, when it comes to American cinema, there are the giants of film noir, or Buñuel or Fellini. Japanese animation is not yet well known in Europe. The wonders of Švankmajer or Piotr Kamler are relegated to film festivals. René Laloux forged a new path with "Fantastic Planet", Special Prize at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival.

But in reality, René was not naïve. I know him well, we have discussed this topic. He knew that it would take a lot of time and many films before shattering old perceptions... And 40 years later, we are still far from that goal...!

The new screenplay turns its back on being a children's film from the get-go. It will be called "Gwen and the Book of Sand", a tale for everyone. An adventure film with irony about the world that we are headed towards, made up of absurdity and religion... and mostly a poetic film with great beauty...! With Bernard and Nicole we decide: we will make a feature film that is as beautiful as a short film...!



In our mind, the team should be comprised of no more than six people. A small crew for a short journey. I call the CNC, and learn that a feature film is a minimum of one hour and five minutes... Since I averaged one year to produce 10 minutes, six people could very well, in the same duration make a one-hour film... (As it turns out, we will become a crew of nine people, and it will take four years).

Next, where will we make the film?...

Our little house, that has already welcomed a few friends who are making their own short films, like Michel Ocelot, will not be large enough. In the village below, at Saint-Laurent-le-Minier, is a large, abandoned building by a beautiful river: The Factory. It is a wonderful place. A former silkworm factory, with a mill for spooling silk. Inside, there is still a wheel and a holding basin. In 1979, there is not much of a silk industry left, the villages are deserted, even the berry bushes have disappeared... but in this village of 300 inhabitants, there is still a boulangerie, a market, a post office and two cafés. The Factory is comprised of three stories, each measuring 100 square meters. One of them will be dedicated to our project, it won't take too much work to renovate it. And since there are just a few of us, there's enough space for everyone. From the bridge, a few unknown people look at the great facade of the building, lit by the sun, over the running water below. Back then, there was no talk of "hipsters", we were "hippies" without even knowing it. We look at each other smiling. We can already visualize it all...!

The screenplay is finished but still in "development" form. I sketch the characters. The budget will be threadbare. The Palme D'Or for my short film at Cannes will be somewhat helpful, and in a few weeks, the financing is set up with the support of Films A2, participation of Gaumont and an advance on earnings from the CNC. I can't believe it.

Little by little our crew comes together.

After Bernard Palacios and Nicole Dufour, it is Claude Luyet's turn. He is another director from Geneva. Next come Marie Christine Campana, Barbara Haider, et Claude Rocher. Later, Henri Heidsieck and Emile

Bourget join in. Emile just finished “The King and the Mockingbird” and agrees to work as assistant director. The terms are set from the get-go: everyone will receive the same salary. And if the film is profitable, we will share the spoils equally! Each one of them has had a lot of experience making their own films, and no doubt they have others that they dream of making, but for now, they are willing to put them on hold for this collective adventure... They had no idea this journey would take four years to complete.

Pre-production begins…

Freedom is the overarching rule, of course. Naturally though, it is counterproductive… Even if we had the budget for a line producer, we can't imagine having someone looking over our shoulder counting how many seconds we produced on any given day… or if this backdrop is fitted properly on the workbench…

We have a timetable and a calendar, but they stay inside my drawer. As the storyboard advances, I begin questioning some of the screenplay story points which are still unresolved, like what is the daily life of these desert dweller characters, their wardrobe, their inventions… The crew all contribute to this process voluntarily. The most important thing is for everyone to be on the same page, in the same story. We are far from the city without owing anyone any explanation, a bit lost, forgotten, or nearly so, and happy to be. For many on the team, without stating it overtly, there is a desire to take a break from their real lives. Each one has found a place to live nearby and maintains a sense of independence. Most of them grow a vegetable garden. Claude is hired on the town's soccer team… We work from morning until night without counting the hours. Apart from a few outings on bicycles or hunting mushrooms, we do nothing else but work together on this film… which we still have no idea what it will be.

To film the shots, the old Éclair will do the trick. At Paul Grimault's studio, we had devised a horizontal camera set up. The idea came from an experience I had with the German director Peter Fleischman with children's drawings that had been hung on a wall. To work while standing up is more comfortable than being hunched over a table in a classic vertical animation set up (like on "Noah's Ark", "A Random Bomb" or "Calaveras" by Jacques Colombat, or "La Tête" by Emilie Bourget)… but at the Factory, things get complicated: I want a multi-plane set-up! … Horizontal, but inclined at a 10 degree angle. Three planes made of glass, 50 centimeters apart, all movable laterally, each having its own discrete lighting… A dream!! I sketch up a blueprint, but we are not capable of building it. Luckily, we meet Patrick Darlot, a young engineer, who will take on this task. He becomes part of the team and is quickly in charge of all things technical. We nickname him "Geo Finditall".

At the Factory, all the work is being done on the ground floor, the two floors above shall be renovated at a later time. We have what we need. A partition creates a separate space for the camera set-up which is still being built. We work in the daylight from the windows overlooking the river.

After a few attempts, we come up with the style of the film. It will be a mix of animation drawings and paper cut outs. Well, not so much a mix, as a superimposition. We chose the hardest path!

Claude Luyet and Henri Heidsieck will animate the entire 65 minutes of the film in a traditional style on tracing paper. But the 24 drawings per second (or 12 for the slower movements) per character will not be drawn on cells. They will be sketched on drawing paper and colored in by Marie Christine… then touched up with a paintbrush by Nicole to give the image volume (!) Then they will be cut out with scissors by Barbara and fixed on a cell so that they can be placed on the multiplane glass!

Without any exaggeration, I believe we invented the most complicated method ever to create a film (and, to my knowledge, never employed to make a feature length film!). But what a shock when we projected the first few seconds at the Ganges cinema, in a neighboring town. The characters have a fluidity of movement, instead of having that "flat" look of traditional animation. They are imbued with the life of the paintbrush! They integrate impeccably with Bernard's backgrounds!

Is it even humanly possible to arrive at 65 minutes of animation with this method? (Remember that computers weren't used in animation until the 1980s). No one in the group even asks himself/herself that question.

The filming begins…

The script is divided into three acts: 1. Life in the desert and the kidnapping of the little boy by the Makou…. 2. Gwen and Roseline's journey to rescue their friend… 3. The City of Gods (that in some versions is called the City of the Dead) where the secret of the Makou will be revealed.

We decide to follow the script in a chronological manner… The first few months, we work on the life of the nomads among the objects in the sand… We do a lot of research on the Makou... As Bernard makes the backgrounds, I draw the "mise-en-scène" (which we now call the "lay out"). Because of the multiplane, our backgrounds must be very large in size. Some of them are as wide as 1.5 meters… Animation is always custom made. Pierre Alrand, the composer, delivers the temp track, with invented instruments that the nomads play on forks or on giant ladles…

Very quickly, I realize that the first act is taking too much time to produce. We didn't prep enough. Background characters require more work and slow our process down. It's my fault. Claude and Henri are forced to wait patiently. They keep themselves busy by starting to animate the Makou from the beginning of Act Two.

That section, the journey across the desert, must be the most visually beautiful part of the film. To walk in the desert, we placed the characters on stilts (it is unrealistic, but it gives them such beautifully ethereal silhouettes!)… They disappear into ravines or march on chaotic crests, on the cliffs of giant refrigerators or washing machines… The dark city appears in the distant horizon, unreachable.

They must pass through the suburb of the clocks, before beginning their ascent. Will we have any money left for Act Three… to be able to realize the most essential aspect of any screenplay, the heart of the story, the moment of resolution? This passage in Act Two is too long, but Bernard's backgrounds are too beautiful. We want to stay there a little longer…

The months go by. I can foresee the day when we will have to make cuts. Notably, a sequence which we had envisioned, a musical sequence which I wanted to do very badly… where Gwen and Roseline travel through a field littered with musical instruments. This time the setting is not a desert. It is inhabited by a hermit who has lost his ability to speak. When the two travelers ask him for directions, he must answer by using the musical instruments… I liked this sequence, and it was ready to go. But it stayed in boxes because we were running out of time… and money…

Jean Paul Gaspari pays us a visit. He sees that the screenplay has changed and evolved but he doesn't hold it against us. The original structure, more classic, almost "Hollywoodian" as the slyest in the group might say, has begun to crack… until the end of the script, which I don't like very much. It is evident that the two women will reach the city and rescue the boy who had been kidnapped by the Makou… Seeing Bernard's illustration, we all agree: the film must keep its fundamental character: it will be surrealistic or not be anything at all!

On any given morning, someone from the team will walk into the workshop and announce: "Friends! I have found the ending!" An idea that came to him/her the night before. It is a brand new ending that we all rave about… I begin storyboarding again… and by day's end, after having ruminated over all the consequences of this new idea, it is jettisoned… until the following day, where a completely new idea is suggested…

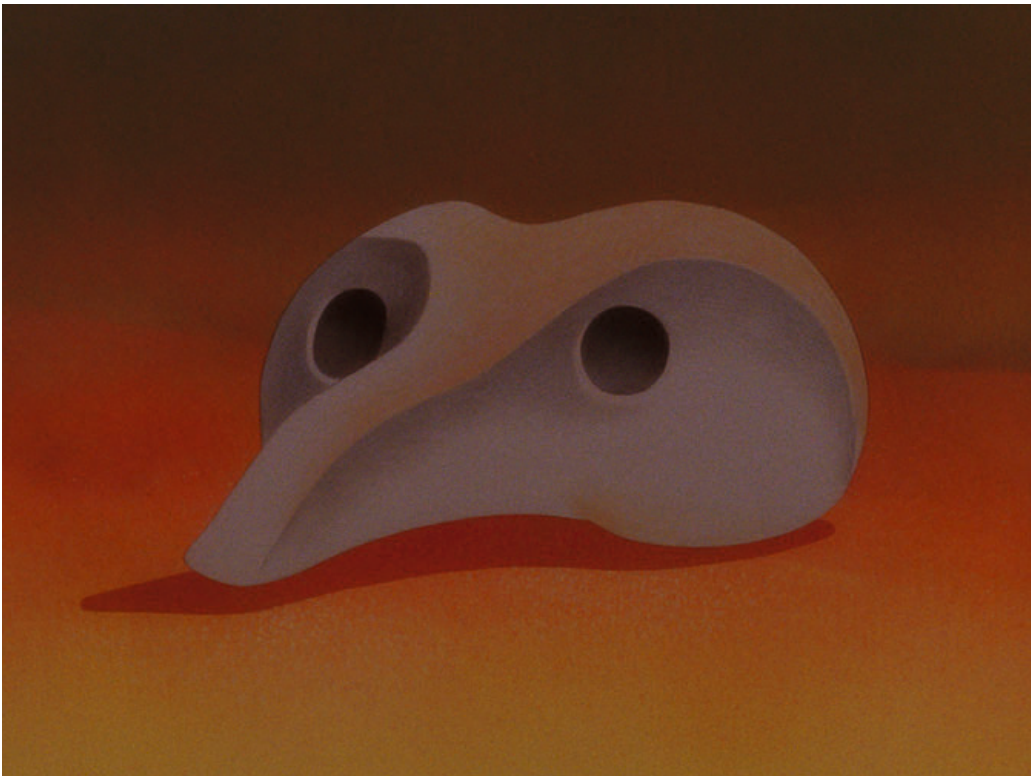
In these kinds of situations, usually, a line producer will intervene. But there is none to speak of here. Antenne 2 and Gaumont, the co-producer and the distributor – they have forgotten about us. In the four years of production, not a single person made the trip to get an update on how their film was progressing. Did they trust us implicitly? Were we too far away from their *arrondissement*? (It is true that, back then, to get to us, you had to jump on a plane, and from Montpellier, drive up the Cévennes mountains for over an hour and a half on a perilous little road)… I believe that that was what rescued our film. Under any other conditions, production-wise or even logically, the film would have been abandoned!

One day, while we were in our third year of production, a television crew from the Antenne 2 network showed up. Their mission: to document the daily life of these Indians at the end of the earth… At first, everything goes well. It is sunny. We are welcoming and kind. We have to pretend to draw. Lucky for us, that's what we do every day… But we slowly realize that we will project an image of this "survival community" from 1968, kind artisans who chose to withdraw from the world… When the director wants to film Kali cooking for the team, and Nicole working in the vegetable garden behind the factory, they both refuse! The documentary ended there. I don't know if this report ever aired on television. None of us

had a television set…

Little by little, other people come to visit, much more enjoyably. In the small world of animation, people have started talking about our little adventure. Back then, festivals were somewhat like family affairs, and every summer we'd have visits by: Raoul Servais, Paul Driessen, Frédéric Back, Nazarov… etc. And even our friends from the National Office of Film in Montreal.

One day their studio sent us a young filmmaker who had writer's block with his short film screenplay. He just couldn't finish it. He came to us at the right time and place!... In addition, he'd been given a sabbatical by the ONF, so we adopted him. He left a year later without even having finished his script. But he was enchanted by his stay.



Time passed…

We are now in 1984, four years and three weeks into our adventure. To be fair, we ran out of money for about six months of that time. We had to stop… the group dispersed, and then everyone came back, with two new additions: Gilles Burgard and Francine Chassagnac… And on September 15, the film is at the LTC laboratory in St Cloud. Emily Bourget comes with me to the very first screening of the very first print. How to describe this emotion?... In the audience, two friends. Jacques Barrault from the CNC and Jean-Jacques Bernard… I have had some challenging preview screenings, but none like this one. Before this, short films were just my business, here however, I watched in terror and doubt, knowing how hard-won each passing image was. All our blood, sweat and tears… How can we present such a thing to the public?... Luckily, the sequence with the "Manufrance" catalogue had its effect. Jean-Jacques Bernard let out a laugh. Well at least now I won't jump into the Seine River after the screening… Jean-Jacques earned my eternal friendship.

I call the Factory: All is well! The film is superb!... But the ordeal is far from over: there is a screening of the first color-timed print in the basement of the Gaumont Film Company. They will distribute the film in the next few months. All the executives are present. And I expect to see all the financiers who invested in the film… but with so much time having passed, some of them have moved onto other jobs or companies. I'm not sure who these people are… They look at each other and question me: What is it? A cartoon? Great. They sit back in their plush seats. We produced Lucky Luke, no problem… The projection of the film unfolds in total silence. I observe everyone who is watching. Even the "Manufrance" catalogue sequence produces no reaction, no smiles… When the lights turn on again, I fear the worst. But they are gentlemen. The director of the company had left before the end of the film. His colleagues congratulate me sympathetically. It is not the film they expected to see, it is strange and certainly not for kids!

Luckily, Gaumont has a plan B. A fantastic chap, Claude Philippot, who is used to handling challenging projects, standing in the back of the room, barely containing his laughter. He understands what he's dealing with here

and is more than happy to take care of Gwen...!

What a stroke of luck...! The film, as predicted, didn't find an audience of millions, but it traveled around the world and its journey is not yet finished… Its voyage was even longer than I could ever have predicted, because even today it is still getting reactions from new audiences who are enthusiastically astonished by it.

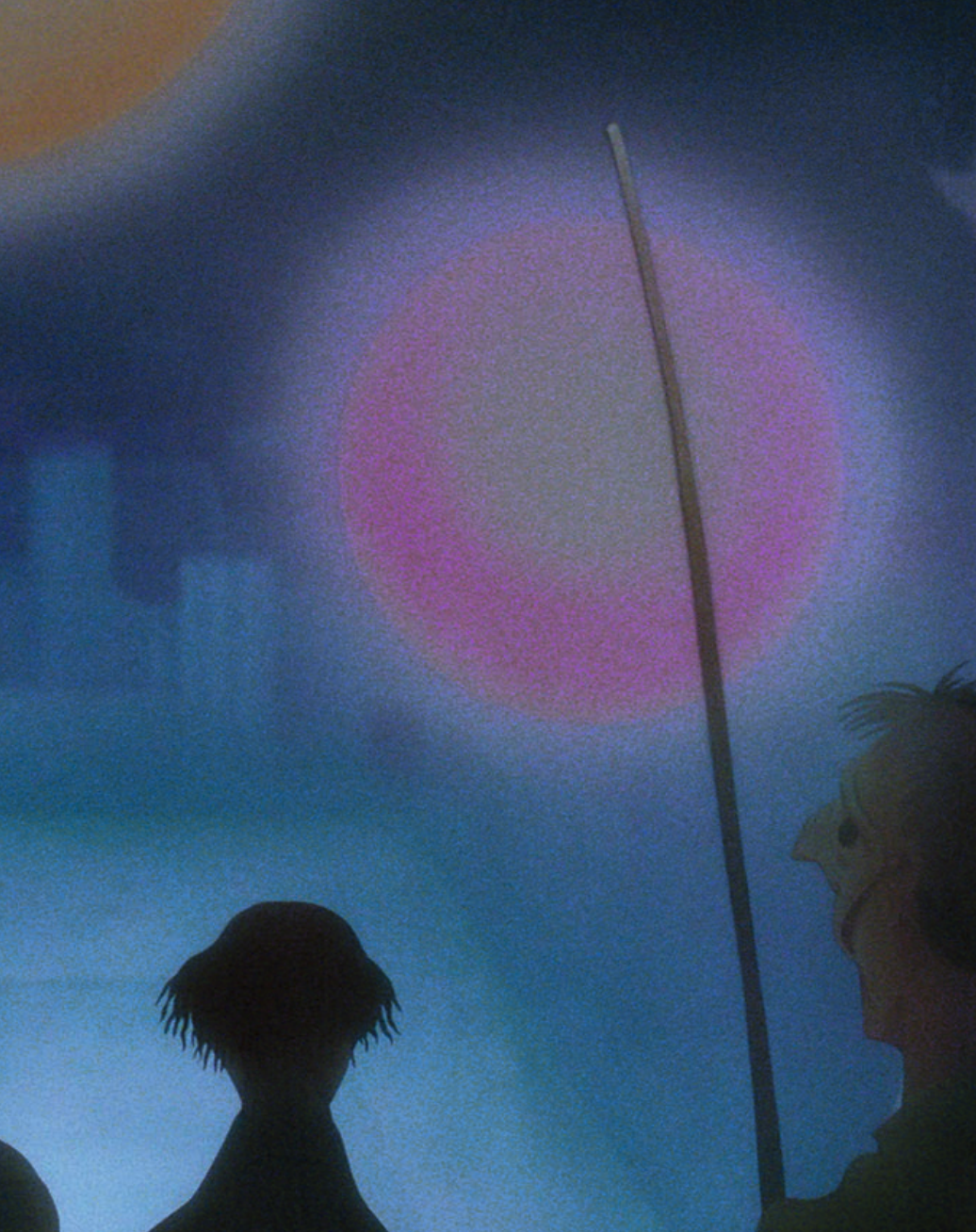
For months, I accompanied the film in art house movie theaters. It wasn't easy. People said, what a pity! Was it too early for its time? Maybe in a few years?... This was thirty years ago! But it's true, the audiences for animation have changed… and the children finally grew up.

As I write down the tale of this adventure, it seems stranger and stranger, as if it were outside the boundaries of time… Our little group reminds me of the films from 1936, by Renoir, Melville or Duvivier, where it's about the pleasure of being together, off the beaten path... Is it impossible to reproduce this nowadays?

When I finally returned to our group at the Factory in the Cévennes mountains, after the film was released, I found that for the most part they decided to remain in the valley. Each of us had regained our independence, moved on to our own films… Bernard and Nicole had bought a house up the river… Emile bought one down the river… Henri on top of the hill… and the Factory became a full-fledged production studio…

But that is another story.

Jean-françois Laguionie



GWEN AND THE BOOK OF SAND

by

Jennifer Lynde Barker

Legendary French animator Jean-François Laguionie has been making distinctively beautiful and intelligent films for six decades: nine short films and seven feature films, to be exact. From his first short in 1965, *The Lady and the Cellist*, to his most recent feature film, *A Boat in the Garden* (*Slocum et moi*), which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2024, he has consistently produced contemplative visions and intriguing narratives. While his aesthetic has evolved over the years, it has always retained elements of its early surrealism and his stories remain dedicated to artistic creation and the joy of imagination. From first to last, his films embrace thoughtful characters and seek to portray the potential good in human beings. *Gwen and the Book of Sand* (1985) was Laguionie's first feature film, and is a fitting culmination to his earlier work. But while many of those films are set by the sea (or even in it), *Gwen* is notable for its lack of water and desert setting. Not for nothing is it subtitled *The Book of Sand*. A surreal and post-apocalyptic science fiction fantasy, it is a stark and minimalist fable of friendship and survival whose prescient view of environmental disaster remains both relevant and mesmerizing.

Born in 1939 in Besançon, France, Jean-François Laguionie grew up in the outskirts of Paris and studied art, theater design, and directing before moving into filmmaking. His deep interest in all the arts is evident throughout his oeuvre, and animation was an ideal medium for him to combine his affinity for art, music, design, and filmmaking. He studied with the great animator Paul Grimault, who became an important influence, advocate, and friend. Grimault produced his first three short films and encouraged his experimentation with cutouts and gouache (a

kind of opaque watercolor painting) and the development of his distinctive style. His first film, *The Lady and the Cellist*, won the Cristal for best short film at the Annecy Animation Film Festival in 1965. Subsequent short films saw him honing his animation techniques and storytelling skills, before founding a production company at an old factory in the Languedoc-Roussillon region in southern France. The first feature film made there was *Gwen*, and others followed, including work by other animators, such as Michel Ocelot's early silhouette animation. Laguionie has continued to make remarkable feature films since *Gwen*, evolving his style while becoming ever more complex with his characters and narratives. Fifty-four years after his first prize at Annecy, Laguionie was awarded the Cristal for Lifetime Achievement in 2019.

Laguionie's first work is set on the northern coast of France and the English Channel—at the cliffs of Étretat, across from the famous white cliffs of Dover. *The Lady and the Cellist* is a surreal and poetic tale that begins with a cellist playing Édouard Lalo's Cello Concerto in D Minor while gazing at the ocean. He sees a woman fishing in the water as she is swept away by the stormy sea—and follows her into a magical underwater world. Laguionie harnesses the ocean's real and metaphorical power often in his films, and its immense unknowable spaces aptly depict the exquisite and dangerous realm of imagination. This film is often surreal, with a limited animation whose gouache backgrounds resemble modernist art. Laguionie's love of graphic design can be seen in the theatrical nature of the setting, and the juxtaposition of flat image and deep subject (both ocean and narrative) creates a Brechtian alienation effect. While the oceanic space in the film is risky, it is also obviously a necessity for artistic production: in the end the couple escapes hostile sea creatures only to be confronted with the equally frightening (yet mundane) sunbathers on shore. They choose to walk away into the cliffs on their own after this—seeking a life free of bourgeois preoccupations.

Laguionie's next film also explores the power, danger, and transformative potential of water. *Noah's Ark* (1967) features vast yet simple landscapes done in the same gouache animation. The snowy mountains, like the sandy dunes in *The Lady and the Cellist*, evoke a formal modernist look—something like Georgia O'Keeffe's deserts with their clean lines

and voluptuous curves. The film has the same eerie sensibility and dry humor as the first, charting the subtle violence and grandeur of the natural world. The film ends with an isolated couple at the center of an alternate new world, just as *The Lady and the Cellist* does—a preoccupation that Laguionie revisits in a number of films. *Potr' and the Girl from the Water* (1974), for example, is a Celtic tale Laguionie wrote. In it, a man and a mermaid fall in love with each other and both seek a way to enter the other's world. Potr' suffers through various transformations until he finally becomes a merman, only to return and find his beloved mermaid is now a woman. As in O. Henry's famous story "The Gift of the Magi," the cosmic irony of their desires and sacrifices affirms both the depth of their great love for each other and the difficulties inherent in any relationship.

This idea becomes an extended metaphor in *Rowing Across the Atlantic* (1978), which won the Palme d'or for short films at Cannes, as well as a César. The film exists entirely on the ocean, whose vast unknown space mirrors the mysterious development and endurance of a long love relationship. This striking film chronicles a couple who start out rowing across the ocean in a small boat in 1907 and continue this journey throughout their life. They write about their thoughts and feelings, play music together, witness the sinking of the Titanic, row with and against each other, fantasize surreal and violent encounters, and enjoy the beautiful vistas of the ocean together as time moves ever forward. The animation is simple yet nuanced, with pastel shades in daytime and eerie gradations of grey at night. Their surreal dreams evoke the haunting moments of discord all couples experience in odd images that unmask their human vanities. The film also depicts the redemption and joy a couple can find in the natural world and each other—a realization painted on an even larger scale in *Gwen*.

In contrast to these films steeped in the profound world of water, *A Random Bomb* (1969) is set in an isolated and abandoned town in the midst of a desert—a location Laguionie explores further in *Gwen*. Laguionie's critique of materialism as a useless, even destructive endeavor, also begins to find shape in this film. The setting feels like an empty stage set, and indeed the people have fled an undetonated bomb and are watching it from the hills. The look is modernist and surreal,

echoing Giorgio de Chirico's paintings, with eerie empty spaces, strange perspectives, classical buildings and random objects. It has the sensibility of a Western with its desert winds, long empty street, banging shutters, skipping record, and abandoned meals—it even has a showdown between a lone stranger and the villain (i.e., the bomb). The haggard townspeople watch the man through a telescope as he jauntily capers around town, playing havoc with their belongings. Finally, too incensed to stop themselves, they rush in and run him out of town, only to be blown up.

Laguionie made two live action films next—*Private Beach* (1971) and *Hélène or the Misunderstanding* (1972)—before returning to animation for good with *Potr' and the Girl from the Water* in 1974. Following this fable, he made two films that focus on masks: *The Actor* (1975) and *The Devil's Mask* (1976). By this time Laguionie had moved from Paris to the Cévennes mountains with his partner Kali Carlini and their two children. An artist, Kali worked with him on these two films, and their aesthetics and animated styles differ from his earlier work. Previous to these films, Laguionie's characters often look as though they are wearing masks, and occasionally resemble mimes (not surprising, given his interest in this art). But with the exploration of masks in these films he seems to move towards greater intimacy with his character representation—becoming more realistic and mobile, if still abstract at times. This also coincides with his expansion into feature filmmaking in the 1980s—his longer narratives incorporate realism, while remaining sourced in surrealism and allegory.

Gwen and the Book of Sand (1985) was Laguionie's stunning first feature film. A subtle and gripping tale set in a post-apocalyptic desert, it was meticulously and laboriously constructed by Laguionie and his team in an old silkworm factory they converted into a studio called La Fabrique. Though the film struggled to find its audience at first, it received critical praise, won the French Press Award at the Annecy Animation Film Festival, and has continued to find new and appreciative audiences over the years. Laguionie's story of its production is included in this Blu-ray edition and is a remarkable tale on its own. Briefly, *Gwen* featured a small and incredibly dedicated production team, some of whom were also filmmakers. They formed a cooperative for the creation of the film, with Laguionie directing and co-writing the story and script with Jean-

Paul Gaspari, and Bernard Palacios and Nicole Dufour responsible for image design. Émile Bourget co-directed, Claude Luyet, Henri Heidsieck and Claude Rocher animated, and Barbara Haider and Marie-Christine Campana managed cut-outs and coloring. They sought to make a serious and beautiful feature-length animation, and did, taking four years to complete it. The crew lived together in and around the factory, replicating in many ways the desert community of the film (and fulfilling the 1970s dream of Edenic rural living!).

From its first images of sand dunes, blue sky and a barren tree blown by the wind, *Gwen* presents a stark portrait of isolation amidst the primal forms of nature. But the presence of people is soon fitted into this world when a 173-year-old woman (Roseline) describes a legend: a terrible storm that followed the departure of gods from the world, with obliterating fires that left behind only sand and a giant mysterious object—the Makou. The film thus begins with a distant apocalypse—perhaps a nuclear one, given that this is the 1980s and such a future was widely feared during the Cold War. This fear made its way into numerous films—both as actual nuclear war (past and future) and as a fantasy or horror version. Movies like *The Atomic Café* (1982), *War Games* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), *Testament* (1983), *Barefoot Gen* (1983), *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *One Night Stand* (1984), *Threads* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984), *Night of the Comet* (1984), *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), *The Sacrifice* (1986), and *When the Wind Blows* (1986) leveled didactic, satirical and allegorical critiques at humanity's self-destructive tendencies. Like *Nausicaä, Gwen* imagined a world long after the cataclysm, filled with strange fragments of a fractured civilization that no longer makes sense.

The Makou is such a fragment for the nomadic peoples of the desert who fear it—"a monstrous thing" like an inverted pyramid which mystically materializes strange objects into the world. They use these objects, however—giant empty suitcases, broken glasses, forks, and bathtubs—despite not understanding what they are. Makou means "guardian of the language of the sands" according to Roseline (who has never been inside), and in fact, there is a book there—the revered Book of Sand—that turns out to be only a 4000-page generic 20th century mail-order catalog. The people of the Makou try to invest this catalog of objects with spiritual value but it is a dead end. Their faith generates an empty materialist culture that leads Roseline to call it the "land of the dead." Even so, the Makou becomes the destination for a journey made by Roseline and Gwen—an orphan girl who is an outsider to the nomadic desert community. She resists wearing a veil as the others do, and as such she becomes more than just a shadowy part of the collective—she is an individual who strikes out on her own. She defies tradition by sleeping in the desert on a night the Makou is working its magic and is joined by Nokmoon, a boy who carries a small glowing scorpion in a jar. They

witness the Makou's power, running from its bright light as shoes fall on them. The light suddenly carries Nokmoon away, so Gwen and Roseline set off to rescue him.

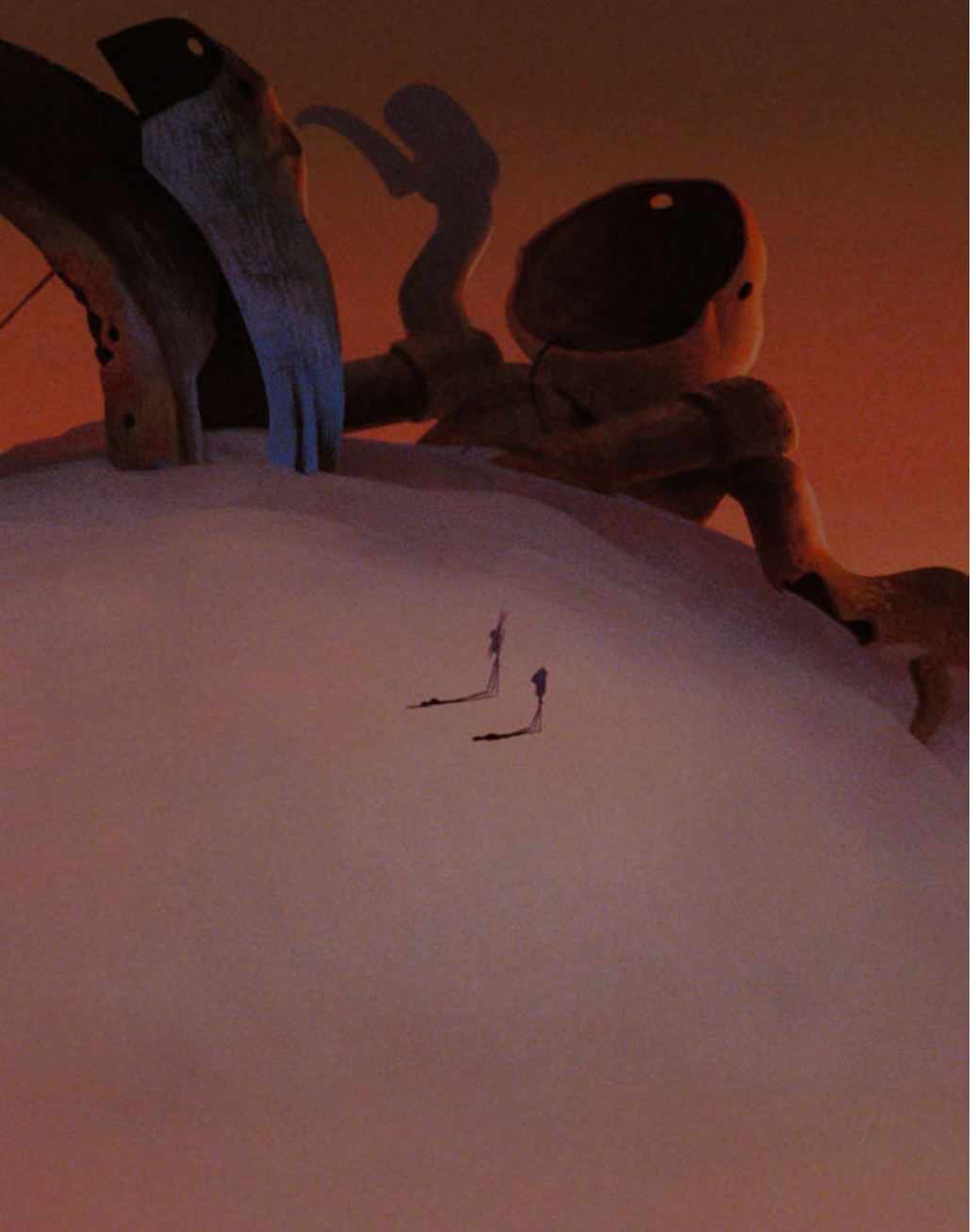
The film is beautiful—gouache drawings and cut-outs combine to create, at times, something akin to Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints, with gradations of color in the sky at sunrise contrasted with delicate figures on tall stilts strolling across sand in the foreground. They look like herons with their long legs as they rhythmically lope through the desert, a fluidity of movement enhanced when they face into the wind in flowing robes. The multiplane camera that Laguionie designed for the film (built by engineer Patrick Darlot) gives depth to the flat images, creating a shallow focus reminiscent of live action film. The pastel shades of the colors evoke softness and fragility, and permeate the film with a dreaminess that perfectly matches the story. The lengthy process of drawing on tracing paper, then coloring and cutting images before placing them on a cel to photograph on glass may have felt excessive but the outcome is superb: the film shines with the authenticity of its carefully crafted materiality. The gorgeous blues and greens of a night sky paired with the dark silhouettes of human figures; Gwen looking like a gentle white feather as she jumps on a bed while soft white feathers from a pillow surround her; the nuanced and luminous faces of Gwen and Nokmoon as they reveal themselves to each other and us, transforming from finely detailed images into sketches that commune and merge in love—all are perfect images of happiness.

The desert in this film, like the ocean is others, is the site for solitude, stupor, and a silence made up of minute meditative noises like the sifting of sand. The soundtrack is simple but riveting, with music by Pierre Alrand (a frequent collaborator): melodic string ensembles, medieval chanting, ambient chords, a sonorous voiceover, quiet conversations, simple sounds of the desert and its people, like music made on a giant fork, or the cries of a bird merging into instrumentation. Singing is a key element of the religion practiced by the inhabitants of the Makou—they are no different from those living in the desert, except they wear Venetian masks instead of veils and take part in creating the masses of objects that overwhelmingly surround them all. They live in a kind of medieval monastery, where "monks" patiently draw images from the catalog in illuminated

manuscripts while others chant these objects into existence with the aid of an animate globe of light. The world is just as mysterious for them as for the nomads, and they face it with an empty sacredness sourced in material excess. "The Desert of Images" was the project's first title and the landscape is littered with objects, which increase in number and surreal malevolence as Gwen and Roseline climb into the Makou. Telephones, paintings, mannequins, and dice build a bizarre entrance to a city that harkens back to settings in Laguionie's other films: abandoned towns, empty sea side resorts, and lonely labyrinthian Venetian passageways.

Gwen's desert setting mirrors these other films but adds something more. The desert is a liminal space where human survival is fraught, and it has often been the site for metaphor and symbolism, just like the sea. Deserts are the setting for film westerns, providing a stage for the testing of courage and wit. They are also a staple of post-apocalyptic films for the same reasons. They challenge people to reinterpret the world. As Roseline intones: "Everything can be read in the sand, once the wind's gone. The weight of regret, the lightness of a laugh, or that special haste that quickens one's step on the way to a date." The desert gives significance and purpose to the random objects of the film. It is a space that surpasses human understanding and so recreates it. When Roseline waits for Gwen, she sits on a watch face with literally dozens of clocks ticking around her—a sea of time, in fact. The phrase "the sands of time" conjures the same understanding: the desert is reality in its purest form, covering and transforming everything that people make. It wears down material ambitions into a vast and simple topography that reveals nothing about the future or the past.

But the film gives us hope for the future in Nokmoon and Gwen, two youth who are ready to fully reveal and share their true selves. Both have internalized the desert and Nokmoon's dreams predict a possible future of love and light and joy if people can only open themselves to it. This living image becomes manifest as fireworks—an object in the catalog that transcends the mundane. The film ends on a hopeful note, with Roseline predicting "a clear day" on the horizon where "sky and sand become one." With this hopeful vision of peaceful coexistence between diverse cultures, and its surreal style, odd objects, and desert-like setting, *Gwen* often



recalls René Laloux's *Fantastic Planet* (1973). Laguionie has confirmed the friendship and influence between directors in interviews—and while the two films are quite distinct, they complement each other enormously well as a double feature of animated French philosophical fables—something the world needs more of!

Luckily, Laguionie continued to make feature films after *Gwen*, including two loosely based on Italo Calvino's novel *The Baron in the Trees* (1957). *A Monkey's Tale* came out in 1999, and twenty years later, he co-directed *The Prince's Voyage* (2019) with Xavier Picard. Both films examine and critique human beliefs about power, racism, science, and ecology through the lens of imagined monkey civilizations. *A Monkey's Tale* tells the story of a tribe that became separated and developed into two different societies who are unaware of each other until a young monkey named Kom accidentally falls from one society to the other, shedding light on its beliefs and traditions as an outsider. In *The Prince's Voyage*, an older monkey (Prince Laurent) becomes lost, but is discovered by a young monkey named Tom, who introduces the prince to his complex yet conformist and insular society while his disgraced scientist parents try to use the prince to confirm their theory that other societies actually exist. Both films are thoughtful adventures that urge understanding and tolerance in the midst of conflict. A third film, *Black Mor's Island* (2003) returns to the ocean with a tale about the Kid, a boy searching for pirate treasure, freedom, and adventure.

Like *Gwen*, these three films focus on a young person journeying into the world, and discovering its mysteries and terrors while learning how to navigate their futures. The protagonist of the incredible film *The Painting* (2011) is no different. Co-written with Anik Le Ray (who worked with Laguionie on several other films), *The Painting* juxtaposes an animated world with the real one, and is a thoughtful exploration of justice and the search for self as experienced by Lola, a young girl near the bottom of the social hierarchy. The social order of the film is cleverly determined by character realization in paintings: the Toupins (*tout peint*) are finished paintings, the Pafinis (*pas finis*) are unfinished, and the Reufs are rough sketches. Lola (a Pafinis) refuses to accept this hierarchy, and leads a group of outcasts on a journey to find their creator in the real world—a painter whose work recalls Chagall, Matisse, Derain, Bonnard, Picasso, and

Modigliani. As with Laguionie's later work, the animation is hand drawn and computer animated, uniting the best of both worlds. His inventive freedom with artistic creation is mirrored in Lola, who imagines the world differently, and changes it.

Laguionie's other two feature films—*Louise by the Shore* (2016) and *A Boat in the Garden* (2024)—are also clearly sourced in our world, but joyfully embrace the realm of imagination—and the past—as well. They return to the sea and to the desire to swim or sail in its enchanting waters and are perhaps the most personal of his films. Like the narrator in *Gwen*, Louise is an old woman who muses to herself in her solitude while basking in interior memories and dreams. After she misses the last train from the seashore, she builds herself a home on the beach and finds peace in the rhythms of the ocean. *A Boat in the Garden* sources Laguionie's love of the sea in a father's desire to sail, which he pursues by building a boat in his yard—crafting his dreams into corporeal form. As with Laguionie's previous films, these two suffuse our reality with deeper meaning by joining their characters' rich interior life with the landscapes they inhabit. And as with *Gwen*, the films themselves are Laguionie's gift to the world: visions of love and care crafted by dedicated people keen to show us the beauty that surrounds us.

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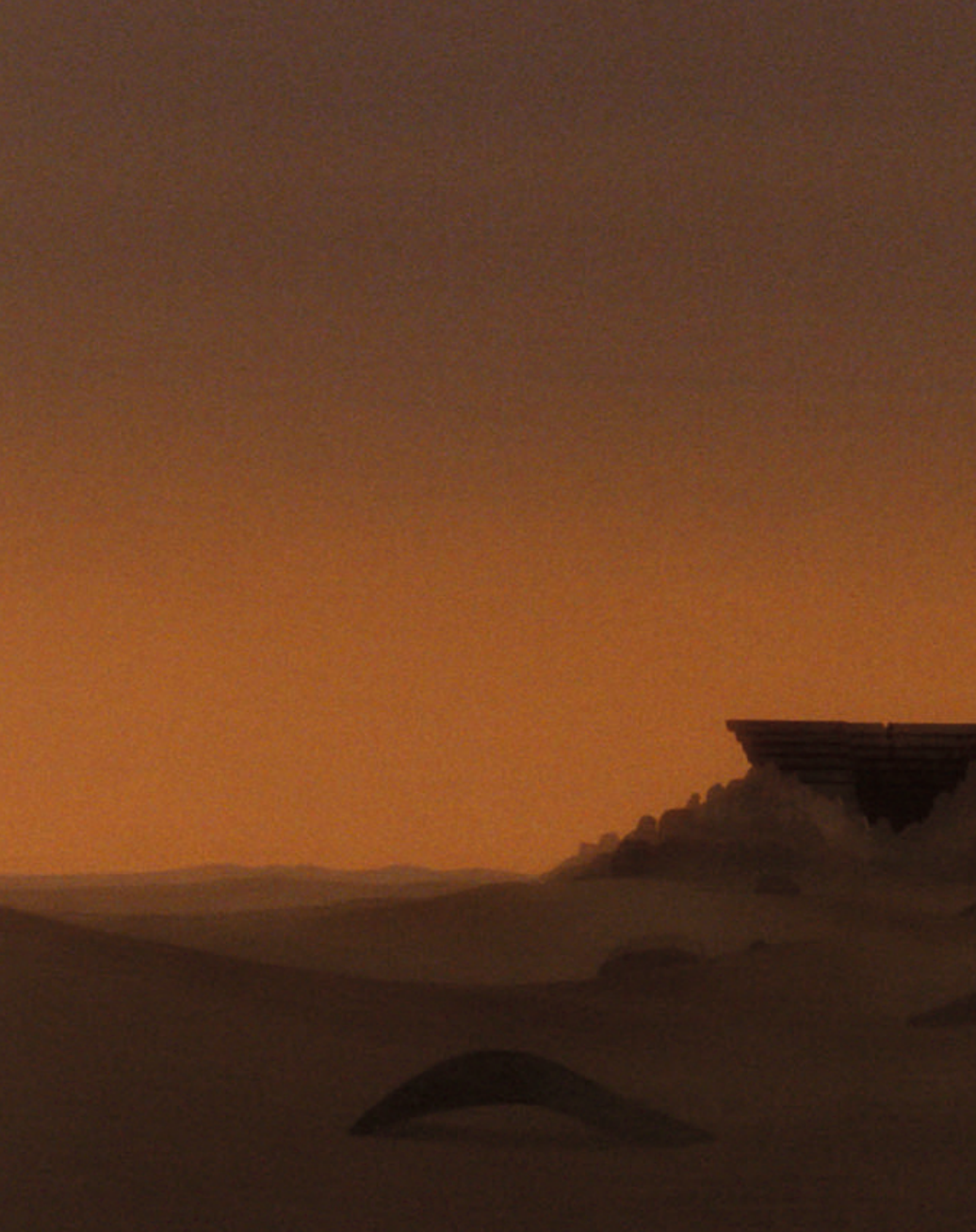
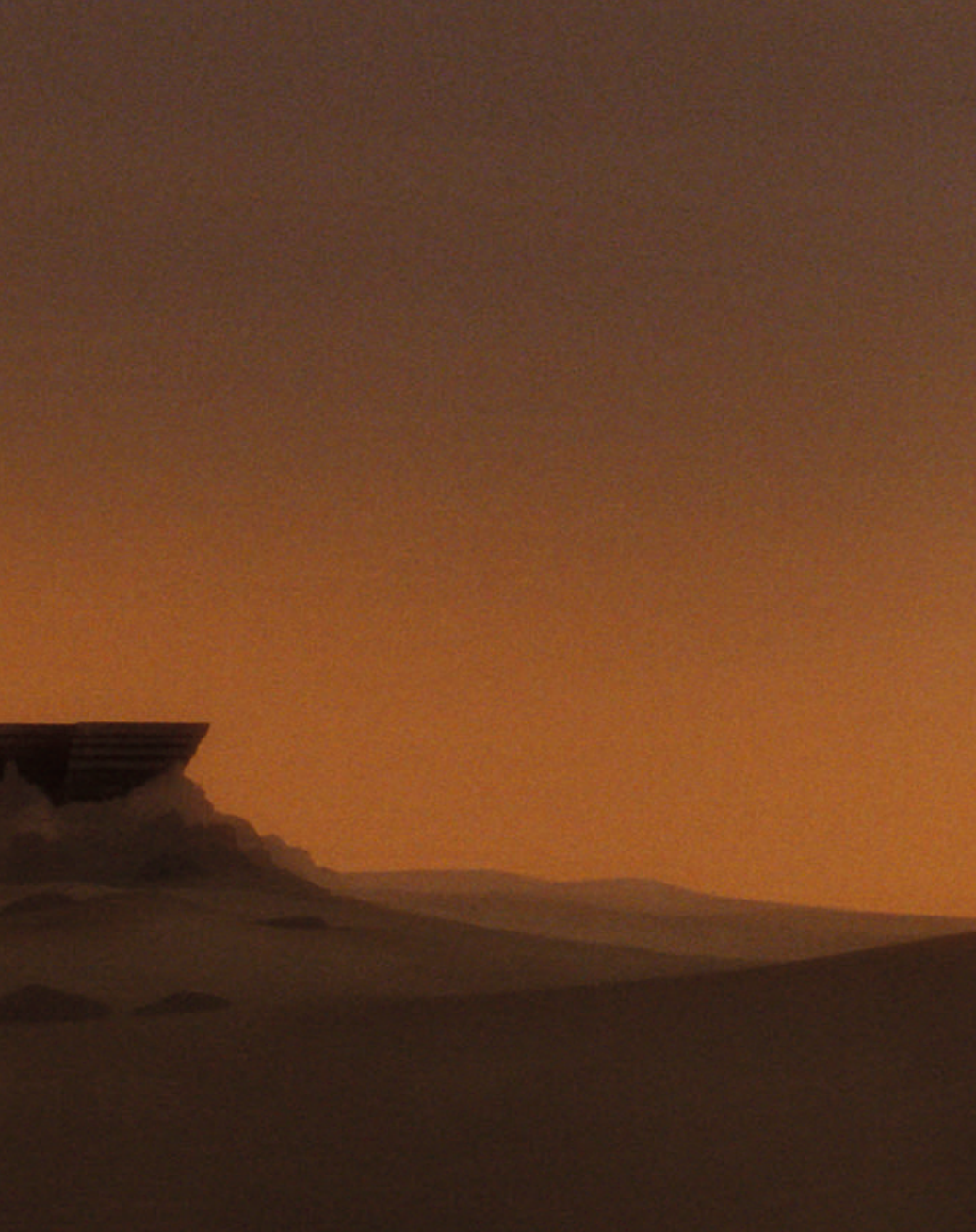




GWEN AND THE BOOK OF SAND

by

Walter Chaw

There is about Jean-François Laguionie's *Gwen and the Book of Sand* (1985) the hazy quality of old stories archived by ancient and failing memory, picking up magical inconsistencies and romantic impossibilities like stowaways on transatlantic cruises, making their slow way through oceans of time. Languionie's films are all like this: tinted by an ineffable hiraeth, that feeling you have when you're very young and more things are possible in the world than there ever will be again as you get older. I am in love with his film *The Painting* (2013), an iconoclastic fairy tale in the style of Van Gogh and Soviet agitprop that tells the tale of a sketched man who leaves his painting in search of his creator, The Painter, to beg him to "finish" his unfinished beloved. Laguionie is probably still best known for his short film *La Traversée de l'Atlantique à la rame* (1978) that won the *Palme d'Or* for short film at the 1978 Cannes Film Festival in which a wealthy couple row out to sea in a small boat where they spend the rest of their lives. The premise, already frightening (what will they eat? how will they survive the elements?) is treated at first as a stylized lark - a comedy of class in which wealth and gumption alone will carry them through. And then about midway it becomes the blackest of fantasies when the pair come across the Titanic as it sinks, using their oars to beat off survivors clinging to their boat, and gliding silently through a troubled ocean marked by hundreds of hands, waving like pale and bloated flowers caught in the eddies of an endless Stygian field. Years pass, then decades, the couple grows old and gray, and the act of drifting, of bearing witness together, coalesces into this beautiful metaphor about how finding the person you're meant to be with is the only thing that will ever matter in the time bleeding out between your birth and your death.

Laguionie returns to the ocean often in his work. It is, in fact, the canvas for his first short film, the haunting *The Lady and the Cellist* (1965) where a love affair is told across an odyssey across, and beneath, the Atlantic. Laguionie had recently come under the tutelage of animation master Paul Grimault after a short foray in the theater. He learned, he said, that there were two kinds of animation: the kind Disney did and the kind that "Kafka would do," and dedicated himself to the Kafkaesque which, he believed had the potential to be "even more enjoyable and funny than the Disney version." I'm charmed by his intention to make "funny" films given how they're more lyrical than humorous: more poetry and metaphor in his images than slapstick and caricature. When he says "funny," I wonder if he means existentially unsettling. In the film, from atop white cliffs on a beautiful day, the cellist sees the lady, wading in the surf, trying to catch something with her net and so frees his cello from its case and serenades her in her labors. Until he plays, the only sound is of waves breaking against the shore and seagulls crying from the sky above. It is, I think, a lovely way for Laguionie to make his introduction into this medium. The woman hears the music and smiles a small smile. The wind rises, the sea darkens, and the Lady is swept into the open water. The cellist pursues in a small rowboat and his song continues on the soundtrack even after he, himself, capsizes in the chop of the storm. In the deep underwater, the Lady and the Cellist are reunited. He plays on the ocean floor until a giant crab and an arapaima attack them. This is the point at which Laguionie slips from the Disney to the surreal and, finally, to a Seurat painting of a French seaside that is either heaven or a dream of heaven.

Laguionie writes short stories as the basis for his films to test their viability. If they don't work as stories, they won't work as films. I think it's that structural tactility in his work that gives them a sense of timelessness. They are voyages where the destination is already known: where the call to adventure of his manifold heroes will always lead to a lesson learned through terrible trials, a new home or state of being, old knowledge discovered by the young at the expense of their youth. In his *A Monkey's Tale* (1999), Laguionie's answer perhaps to Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967), an elder of an arboreal primate tribe holds court before his rapt audience, proclaiming everything in the canopy of their forest to be "good" and everything on the floor of the forest to be "wrong." "The Universe,"

he says, “has two faces” and his description of their literal underlife is illustrated with expressionistic pastiches of demons. His heroes, a pair of monkey brothers made curious by the vagueness of their elder’s fears, decide one twilight to make the drop into the abyss. At its heart, the film is about the roots of racial prejudice. Protagonist Kom discovers a medieval culture of monkeys, separated from his own culture by a natural disaster generations in the past, who believe that Kom’s people are savages - the very demons the elder accuses these people of being. Kom allows himself to be cast as a jester (the first song in the film is called “Assimilate”) in his new home before learning of the deadly palace politics in which this “advanced” culture has embroiled itself.

I adore Laguionie’s *Louise by the Shore* (2016), a film that takes for its setting what appears to be the Impressionistic fantasy that ends *The Lady and the Cellist*. It’s focused on an old woman, Louise (Dominique Frot), journaling by herself beneath a beach umbrella, complaining about the din the children make and musing about the passage of time that covers all manner of fame and accomplishment beneath a blanket of ever-shifting, insensible sand. She is absorbed in her memories - the time she misses her train as a thunderstorm looms, the smiling poster of her prison, the beach now out of season, taunting her in the empty station. She remembers walking through an empty city, its buildings shuttered against the elements and her knocks and rings unanswered. I thought more than once of T.S. Eliot’s poet sitting on the liminal waterside with eternity before him and rat’s alley behind. Louise makes it to her beach house. The lights go out. Her basement floods and the lowering of her candle tells us about the slow passage of Louise’s time. She dreams she is carried off to sea on her bed, borne pleasantly among floating cities of clocks and her faceless neighbors. “I wasn’t frightened,” Louise confides, “I was annoyed.” It’s a good description of aging, I think, when the terrors of mortality are often subsumed by the irritation of rituals interrupted. “It’s funny,” she says, “people are afraid of everything these days.” I think it’s not the people who have changed.

There's a strong throughline to Samuel Beckett in *Louise by the Shore* as well - the sense that Louise is constantly waiting for "someone" to come and find her, the last person trapped out of season at a popular tourist destination. In a closed store she breaks into, hocking beachwear to the unprepared, please note the Lady's fishing net from Laguionie's *The Lady and the Cellist* leaning against one wall. Louise helps herself and builds a shack on the beach, relating how she has settled into a routine beginning with sweeping sand out of her shelter and so now I'm thinking about Hiroshi Teshigahara's *The Woman in the Dunes* (1964), another piece about the howling insignificance of one life held against the unsolvable tangle of that life's complexity. To know someone is to dig a hole in the sand, yes? Every inch forward causes the hole to refill faster. Later, Louise befriends a stray dog (voiced by Laguionie himself), leading her to a reverie about how the corpse of a felled paratrooper becomes the secret sharer for her: another voiceless thing as companion, another receptacle for her long thoughts and her loneliness. Louise believes this dog, Pepper she calls him, can talk. I believe dogs can talk, too, especially when I need them to the most. Louise dreams of being brought up before a kangaroo court of screeching birds, sentencing her to a forever of solitude. "Should a person be punished for having forgotten half her life?" she asks Pepper. Pepper doesn't have an answer for her. Louise reads a story about how a shadow "slips along" behind a woman on a beach, "so pale and so light she began to wonder if it was her memory. Isn't that good?" she asks Pepper.

Gwen and the Book of Sand, Laguionie's first feature-length film, is perhaps the clearest evocation of the threads binding Laguionie's stories of love and dedication even as it's set against one of his most fantastic, uncanniest backdrops. Its narrator Roseline (Michel Robin) chides us for dedicating our lives in search for order and meaning that does not now, nor did it ever, exist. She says: "Why search the sand for answers?" because "it had [already] told us everything." But what does sand say? The answer is Laguionie's life's pursuit. In Christian mythology, a vengeful, terrifying God curses the serpent to crawl on its belly and to eat dust for all the days of its life. Is it too much to equate damnation with a world of sand, then? And all of the world's inhabitants cursed to find their way through the blight of it for the crime of questioning their purpose? Maybe the problem is they can't see the miracle of the world for the sand at its foundation.

The duality of the title *Gwen and the Book of Sand* speaks to the tension between human purpose and cosmological context: the matters of an individual mean nothing in the grand flow of social myth, except to the individual itself and the people who love it and whom it loves in return. The sand, ever-shifting, ever-obfuscating, resistant to life indeed a scourge of it, is only ever what it is: mercurial, chaotic, the liminal divide between two states and the product of eons of grinding all manner of materials down to one. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust -- is that the "everything" the sand has for us, a beginning to our story and an end to it?

Roseline lives on a desert planet, the keeper of tales of her people it seems just for the fact of her extreme longevity. "Time went by," she says, "and life retreated without completely disappearing. It never will. No matter what you do. And in the folds of the sand, slowly, I became a 173 year old woman." I am fascinated by the details of what Roseline chooses to share and how she shares it. She says she slowly turns into an 173 year old woman and that this change happens in the "folds" of the sand. She is a feature of the landscape worn by the elements. The sand takes on organic dimensions with biological qualities: folds of flesh in which a strange and frail kind of life incubates to emerge at last after a gestation of 173 years. She hides in wells with others of her kind when the wind rises on the surface, huddled and terrified and resisting the urge to ask questions of the sand even after it's given howling voice. Laguionie's sand is a preservative, a desiccant as well as an obliterator - T.S. Eliot's forgetful snow made harder, browner, the product of earth rather than sky. When Roseline's people move across their environment, they do so on stilts with walking sticks in emulation of desert animals who have discovered the secret of travel across shifting surfaces. If surviving on sand is the metaphor for existing in an ephemeral state, ever-shifting and unpredictable - then adapting to it in ingenious ways is in every way a celebration of our tenacity in the face of life's inevitable hardships.

Laguionie's landscapes for *Gwen* are astonishing: hand-drawn and painted surrealism, like elaborate Salvador Dali canvases free of right angles and sharp edges. Look at an early ostrich hunt: Roseline's people gliding along like mantises, trying to get a loop around their quarry's neck not to slaughter it, but to harvest its tail feathers as one of their staple foods.

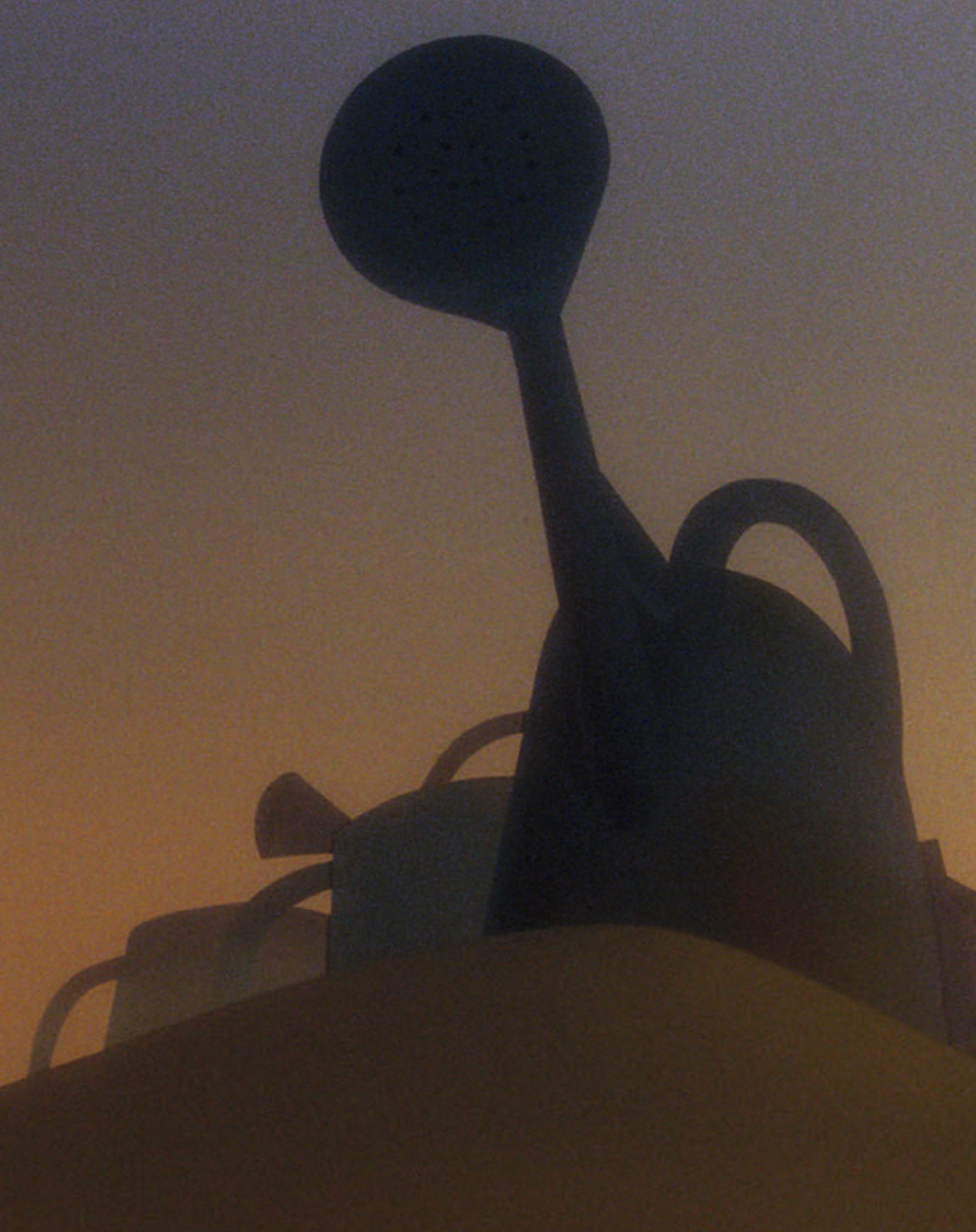
I love the idea of these beings subsisting on this plumage that reminds one so much of the quills of pens and the heads of brushes: the thought that we all are edified in some way through a collective Stendahl Syndrome in which exposure to art causes us to experience an edifying spiritual fullness. We discover that Roseline has adopted a young woman, Gwen, and that Gwen has, one night, become obsessed with a strange young man, Nokmoon. Laguionie depicts the moment Gwen awakens to love with a series of thunderclap events: the young man releases a deadly scorpion and watches it bury itself in gratitude; Gwen covers her face and like a magician's trick, when she pulls her hands away she reveals an older Gwen, one whose face splits like a zygote might into two profiles mesmerized with one another as they move through time together. It's an elegant, expressionistic representation of what it means to meet the person you're to be with and in that moment to finally understand the stakes involved, the full consequences of mortality: how Nokmoon shows mercy to a deadly thing; how he sees the beauty in life, grace and mercy even when it means burying death beneath a blanket of forgetfulness. In the next scene, Laguionie has a man dripping water into the mouth of a bag held in the shape of one of Georgia O'Keefe's terracotta vaginas. Introduction, seduction, consummation in one elegant, wordless stream. *Gwen and the Book of Sand* is a sensual experience - sad and wise, yes, but there's rapture in it, too. Like his *La Traversée de l'Atlantique à la rame, Gwen…* feels very much like an invocation to the muse at the beginning of the epic poem that is this artist's career. Roseline's wisdom, hard-bitten and hard-won, is the key to understanding all of Laguionie's features.

Watch his latest feature, *The Prince's Journey* (2019), a sequel to *A Monkey's Tale* in which the monkey Prince (Enrico Di Giovani) who saved Kom's life in his youth, finds himself shipwrecked in a strange land peopled with simians who have formed a Victorian-era representative democracy. The Prince is treated like an imbecile, prodded and tested with only a young boy, Tom (Tomas Sagols) empathetic enough to treat him as an intelligent being worthy of consideration. They become fast friends, the Prince recognizing the irony of once being the benefactor of Kom whom his people treated as an animal and now imprisoned in his own cultural oubliette by the "civilized" members of this civilization. I don't think Laguionie is aspiring to be a Jonathan Swift - his societies

are not distinct in their peculiarities but rather joined by an essential intolerance of "the other" for fear that the existence of intelligence outside of their understanding of it disturbs their belief that they are the "chosen" people, the one true sentience in the world. The Prince, inspired by the red reflected on the ocean during the gloaming, remembers how he used to draw blueprints for flying machines "littering my floor with paper dreams." Freed from his imprisonment by his small friend, they spend the last part of the film doing their best to, like a master animator, bring his sketches to life so that he might finally find his way home. The Prince's invention is a marvel and the film by itself ranks with Miyazaki's late masterpiece *The Wind Rises* (2013). In parting, The Prince says "to my young companion to whom I owe so much, I don't know how your life will be. But if it ever weighs you down, I know you, too, will spread your wings."

One night, in the vast ocean of sand in *Gwen and the Book of Sand*, Gwen's young man is kidnapped and it's up to Roseline and Gwen to find him, in and out of days, across an ocean of dunes, cresting implacably in silhouette like frozen waves etched in charcoal and grit. Did I mention the bedroom bureaus and writing desks floating in the air? The Lewis Carroll touches that recur throughout Laguionie's work? The graveyard of clocks where Roseline squats for a while like a red-hooded pearl in the metal oyster shell of a pocket watch (which Louise will dream in her solitude)? The artifacts of a forgotten culture dropped from the skies and used by Roseline's people as shelter, tools - giant eyeglasses angled to start campfires amongst a city of doors, a civilization of monastic clerics carefully illuminating and worshiping consumer catalogs. There are elements of Swift here of course, and Dali and Jane Graverol, but also of Walter M. Miller Jr.'s A Canticle for Leibowitz and Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Star." There are so many references from so many disparate sources, but I confess my mind drifted the most to René Laloux's *Fantastic Planet*, especially in the last half of this film where an alien race, Nokmoon's abductors, try to read his dreams as he lounges in a tub, lamenting that the images he creates are "dead before they're alive." I was stricken, too, by how much this accumulation of artifacts and reconstitution of them reflects the philosopher's vision as it guides the artist's hand. There is always a maker of the watch in the desert, even if he's invisible and even if he doesn't know he's created anything. The watchers, Nokmoon's jailers, complain how the boy's "dream keeps changing" as we are shown images of birth, the sun, the eye, and love revolving in ouroborosian fractal perfection, and in their ignorance they "wonder what they mean?" It's the question Roseline answers at the beginning of the film - what use is there to ask? All you need know is already there in our song and art, the things of our hand that reflect the rhythms and the forms that comprise the complex simplicity of living. We exist only to reflect the vast and sublime mystery of our own existence; to be present in our lives and to welcome meaningful company along the way so that the wondrous things we see and feel won't be seen and felt alone. And then we slip beneath the surface and the sand folds smooth and quiet again over the places we used to trouble. Laguionie is a master and *Gwen* is the headwater for a closer contemplation of his lovely, ineffable work.

Walter Chaw is Senior Film Critic for FilmFreakCentral.net. He has bylines in the *NY Times, Washington Post, Criterion, The LA Weekly, NY Post's Decider, NY Magazine's Vulture*, and is an occasional guest on NPR's "Pop Culture Happy Hour." He has written a monograph on *Miracle Mile* and a critical study of the career of Walter Hill called "A WALTER HILL FILM."



Notes on the Restoration

GWEN AND THE BOOK OF SAND was restored in 4K with the director's participation for La Traverse Films by Lumières Numériques post-production in France, with the support of the CNC - National Centre of Cinematography and Animated Pictures (Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée).

Note: **GWEN AND THE BOOK OF SAND** is director Jean-François Laguionie's preferred English translation of the original French title GWEN ET LE LIVRE DE SABLE. The film's title has also been translated as "Gwen, The Book of Sand" and "Gwen, or The Book of Sand" but we're using GWEN AND THE BOOK OF SAND per the director's express wishes.

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